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THE OPEN FORUM MOVEMENT

BY REV. PERCY STICKNEY GRANT, D.D.

THE purpose of the public forum movement is to afford the freest opportunity for the business man and the laboring man to arrive, by open discussion, at a better understanding of the vital questions affecting their relationship; to discover the drift of industrial progress; to guard against the menace of unjust industrial development; to forestall, by reasonable and humane ways, the settlement by sterner methods; to do its part toward the essential end that "the arrogance and whip of Capital and the distrust and evil weapons of Labor be laid aside, so that their hands may be free to join in the grip of a common interest."¹

A recent brilliant critic of American life, H. G. Wells, with a clairvoyant perception of conditions in this country, has declared: "The American community is discovering a secular extinction of opportunity, and the appearance of powers against which individual enterprise and competition are hopeless. Enormous sections of the American public are losing their faith in any personal chance of growing rich and truly free, and are developing the consciousness of an expropriated class."²

But Mr. Wells makes no discovery. He is merely an observer like others before him.

"What wrong road have we taken," asked Emerson in 1848, "that all the improvements in machinery have helped everybody but the operatives? Here they have incurably hurt." Thirty years later Henry George startled complacent America by asking why poverty persisted while wealth increased. His unpalatable formula, "the poor are growing poorer and the rich are growing richer," was made more agreeable by Carroll D. Wright, who explained that as

¹ Joseph S. Auerbach, *North American Review*, December, 1905.

² H. G. Wells, *The Future in America*, p. 81.

the poor were not improving their condition at the rate the rich were advancing, the distance between them was increasing. Without doubt it is becoming vastly harder, as John Mitchell points out, for a workingman to advance beyond his sort of job or out of his class.

"The fact which is most full of meaning at the end of the Nineteenth Century," wrote Prof. Macgregor in his *Evolution of Industry*, "is the existence of an absolute surplus or human residue which is pauper in fact though not in name."

This thrusting asunder of the two economic sides of our population has been recently checked up by the figures of Prof. Scott Nearing, and by the income tax. Prof. Nearing discovered that among wage workers in America four-fifths of the adult males are receiving wages that do not meet a low estimated expense of adequate family maintenance. The income tax lists show that less than one-half of one per cent. of our population has an income over \$3,000 a year. In England the wages of workingmen do not pay for their actual standard of living; at least 15 per cent. is represented by private charities and national services.

In 1850, according to the analysis of the census by Sidney A. Reeve, of every dollar in America, 70 per cent. represented production and 30 per cent. competitive fight for some share of it. In 1900 the ratio was reversed. Out of every dollar, 30 per cent. represented production and 70 per cent. represented the cost of competition. The attempt of the larger share of the country's energy to live upon the product of the smaller portion naturally increases the burden of the wage-worker. "It is in fact the sole reason for any burden at all upon the wage-earners or for unemployment."

While 9,000,000 American workers—according to the estimate of the New York City Employment Bureau—were out of employment last Winter, one American fortune financed the feeding of a foreign nation. While at least 400,000 in New York had no work, collections of porcelains and pictures offered for sale there brought high prices. A working girl living in New York upon \$6 a week, recently expressed the wish sometimes to have a meal that cost thirty cents. At the same time, there are apartments in New York that rent for \$30,000; there are women who spend \$25,000 a year on clothes and pay in loss of interest an equal amount to wear their jewels.

Individuals are not wholly to blame for this condition of things; industrial evolutionary forces, not understood until the mischief was done, are also responsible. We can see now that the workingman under the financial handling of the modern factory system lost his status; that his wages practically buy off his interest in the firm; that machinery and joint stock companies contributed to push apart employers and employes, and that "the Nineteenth Century in working out of the idea of power by means of combination has stratified and classified the people to an enormous extent."¹ So economic analysis confirms and explains the separation of classes that conditions indicated and that statistics proved.

Evidently these processes of class separation, as inhuman in their effects as war itself, cannot go on indefinitely without a catastrophe. In America they have already led to bloodshed. Within the last three years we have seen three exhibitions of civil war: in West Virginia, in Michigan, and in Colorado. "Habit alone," says William James, "is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor." But habits can be changed, especially under the incentive of starvation or injustice.

These deadly clashes, which breed a worse hatred than that which gives rise to them, cannot be banished from our attention by calling them mere exhibitions of an industrial unrest as old as the pyramids. The exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt was a strike in which the workers did not return to their work, but migrated. The French Revolution was a strike which cost the employers their heads and their status. Nor can we forever "jolly" the laborer by telling him that he possesses luxuries that kings of old did not dream of. Jauntily to talk about the inevitableness of industrial unrest does not harmonize class differences. The question is, what is going to stop this pulling asunder before it is too late? What is going to bring the hostile industrial forces of our national life together? What is going to make us really one people—in sympathies, ideals, and institutions? The labor question, of course, is a nuisance; but we can say of it what Emerson said of the question of slavery: "It has a right to be heard and the people plagued with it until something is done."

¹ Macgregor's *Evolution of Industry*.

We are safe in saying that the desired results of industrial peace and of national unity are not to be secured by improving coercive machinery. To destroy trade unions; to organize State constabularies; to deny free speech or give it impossible definition; to increase the list of offenses for which arrest is equivalent to conviction; to rob workingmen of adequate political representation, is not a solution of our problems of class estrangement.

Nor are we encouraged to look for intellectual and sympathetic leadership where ordinarily some leadership is expected. Our most powerful financiers and captains of industry are not ashamed to testify on the witness stand that they have not studied the problems involved in the present issues—that they do not understand the labor question. Naturally, therefore, they cannot offer any help.

Our political parties represent in their primary differences not economic, but constitutional positions. They are essentially conservative; even their liberalism is considerate of the small capitalist rather than of the proletariat. The New York Constitutional Convention gave no heed to the memorial and recommendations of the labor organizations. A great newspaper even taunted the labor men with their inability to retaliate. I can discover no friendliness in American politics toward the problems of the working classes.

The clergy notably display a more human sympathy with the workingman's economic problems, but officially the churches are timid, and their laymen are too often reactionary. In the churches there is being developed a new economic orthodoxy which enfeebles their contribution to the labor problem. Some high ecclesiastics go so far as to declare that the procession of life with its most exalted spiritual vision is passing along outside the church. On the other hand, there are some who quote Jesus to the effect that the division of wealth is not a religious problem.

Colleges do not teach economics and sociology in a fashion to meet the situation. There are a few professors to whom many people are indebted, men like Prof. Ely and Prof. Ross of Wisconsin; Prof. Patten of Pennsylvania; Prof. Seligman and Prof. Giddings of Columbia; and a few like Prof. J. B. Clark, who are trusted because beloved. But our colleges have neither led public opinion on the labor problem nor qualified their graduates to deal with it. The

trustees of one of our leading universities are just now publicly declaring that economics should teach only what is agreeable to capitalists.

The working people are well aware of the hostility of the capitalistic classes and institutions. They look for no help outside themselves. They have been deceived and disappointed so often by pretended friends that they resent help from outside their own class; to accept it has become a mark of class disloyalty.

In default of constructive help from accredited leaders in business, politics, religion and education, volunteers have come forward with new agencies which attempt to correct destructive industrial tendencies; to bring together the extremes of democracy; to spread a more hopeful theory of human nature than that upon which conservative fears are reared, and to broaden the reach of economic education.

University settlements, founded about thirty years ago, set out to bring the culture of English college cloisters to London slums. "They are homes in the poorer quarters of a city where educated men and women may come in daily personal contact with people." Frederic Denison Maurice's Workingmen's College, founded in 1860; Edward Denison's attempt to make his home in the East End of London in 1867; Arnold Toynbee's residence in White Chapel with the Rev. S. A. Barnett of St. Jude's in 1875, and the building of Toynbee Hall in 1885, mark the steps, and at the same time disclose the college and church impulse, that led to the rise of university settlements.

In 1883 the Rev. Dr. William S. Rainsford became Rector of St. George's Church, New York. Before taking charge of the parish or forming especial plans for carrying it on, he had a survey made of the neighborhood. He then founded such organizations as seemed to him suitable for meeting the racial, local or class needs of his parish. This was the first scientific diagnosis of parochial work that I am aware of, and it developed a group of social institutions around it that gave the name "institutional church" to St. George's, and to the large number of parishes since then more or less modeled upon it.

The essence of institutional church work is home extension. It undertakes to make up for the poverty-stricken, limited and often vicious surroundings of the tenement house by supervising entertainment, encouraging education

and physical culture,—in fact, by doing for the children and youth of the poor what a well-to-do family would like to do for its own.

Afterward came the social settlements which attempted more complete co-operation with whatever initiative the slums themselves disclosed. They recognized how much the workingman is trying to do for himself, and proffered their assistance. They put educated and friendly energy into existing popular institutions. They aided neighborhood agencies, school boards, health boards, libraries, the use of parks, labor unions, advantageous racial customs, etc.

More recently, community centers have organized a neighborhood club in the schoolhouse. Freed from racial, religious, and political antagonism, the schoolhouse, because a patriotic and neutral institution, is their rallying place.

They have created a self-governing citizens' movement, taking in not only grown-ups, but young people of both sexes. Games, dancing, athletics, evening classes, lectures, political addresses, "movies," etc., are provided. Started in Rochester, New York, there are now scores of these community centers in the United States, especially in the West.

The open forum is another undertaking to provide a common meeting place for the rich and the poor, free from traditional impediments; to bring together in a humane atmosphere the extremes of society. Like the agencies we have been considering, the open forum bases its action not upon dogmas, traditions, or precedents, but upon the urgent needs of the present and an intelligent view of the future.

Nietzsche says: "The important question for you is not where did you come from, but where are you going?" Walter Lippmann condenses this into his maxim: "Substitute purpose for tradition." The new psychology tells us that "a philosophical study of living beings shows that they may be graded according to the amount of purpose they manifest."¹ But where are we going? What should be our purpose? Is it not safe to say (if we pay attention to the lessons of industrial evolution) that the world is moving toward a greater democracy, toward the spread of freedom, opportunity, and wealth—in fact, toward the highest development for the largest number of human beings by means of the material and spiritual advantages of self-government?

The open forum, although a new device for amplifying

¹ L. E. Emerson, *Psychoanalytic Review*, Oct., 1915, p. 425.

social and industrial conditions, has had an interesting history: The People's Institute was established in 1897 and offered in Cooper Union, at the head of the Bowery, New York, a strategic meeting place for ideas and men. Charles Sprague-Smith, the founder, conceived the plan while a professor of comparative literature in Columbia. He discovered in literature the story of the common laws of social progress, and he longed, as he told me, to get his hands directly into the material of human life. So he gave up comparative literature and set about arousing enthusiasm among the people for a freer, fuller existence.

At the People's Institute, lecturers of wide reputation addressed East Side audiences of thirty nationalities. The audience could ask questions, but could not make speeches. The lecture was often preceded by music and recitations, but not by recognized religious exercises. Later a club house was founded and many valuable forms of social service undertaken.

The invited speakers, under the grilling of an astute and well-read democracy, were taught never to make a statement which they could not back up; they also learned the protective value of a good chairman (Mr. Sprague-Smith) who would not permit them to be put into too deep holes by the audience, although he could not prevent them sometimes from jumping in themselves to their own chagrin, and to the amusement of their tormentors. Prof. Charles Sprague-Smith, philologist, poet, educator in good will, champion of the people, died in middle life as the result of over-work in behalf of this great undertaking. The People's Institute is now led by one of our most enlightened Americans, Frederic C. Howe, Commissioner of Immigration.

The "Public Forum (Inc.) of the Church of the Ascension" was founded in 1907 by the Rector of the Parish and the Rev. Alexander Irvine. If crowds will listen to soap-box orators on street corners; if workmen in factories will give part of their precious noon recess to listen to Y. M. C. A. speakers, should not religious bodies, which control more good auditoriums than anybody else, and have less use for them, offer hospitality in their churches to such groups, and if necessary organize these opportunities under favorable conditions? The Forum undertook to make a church a shelter for what might otherwise have been open-air meetings of all sorts and conditions of men, interested in dis-

cussing modern social and industrial ideas. It was a frank attempt by a church to find out what workingmen, according to their own showing, wanted, and what they considered to be the duty of the Church. The Public Forum audience may debate the subject as well as ask questions.

Since the founding of this forum, several churches in New York and the neighborhood have opened similar forums—notably the Church of the Holy Trinity, in Brooklyn, of which the Rev. J. Howard Melish is Rector; the Church of the Messiah, where the Rev. John Haynes Holmes is Pastor, and the Free Synagogue, under Dr. Stephen S. Wise. Even as far away as Houma, Louisiana, St. Matthews (Episcopal) Church has established a forum. There is also a forum in Starr King's old parish (Unitarian) in San Francisco. Church forums received the endorsement of the Universalists at their Chicago Convention of 1914.

Ford Hall, on Beacon Hill, Boston, was founded by the Baptist Union in 1908. It offers an open forum of a broad and sympathetic type, publishes a paper of its proceedings, and carries on social work. The Ford Hall meetings, through their extension committees, have been instrumental in establishing in New England municipalities, towns and schools, more than thirty forums, modeled more or less closely upon Ford Hall, but with distinctive undertakings described by the specific conditions of their position. Mr. George Coleman, who is responsible for Ford Hall, has exceptional clearness of vision and breadth of sympathy.

The Labor Temple was opened by the Presbyterian Board of Missions, at Second Avenue and Fourteenth Street, New York, in an old building that was formerly a parish church. Owing to its situation on the East Side, and the close connection between its founder, the Rev. Charles Stelzle (who knows more about trade unions than any clergyman in America) and also because it specializes in labor matters, the Labor Temple has developed a highly unified work, now in charge of Rev. Jonathan C. Day, and keeps very closely in touch with a large number of working people.

The Labor Forum is a still later and different type of forum. It meets in a public schoolhouse—the Washington Irving High School on Irving Place. It has no religious exercises or motives, nor is it neutral (as radicals regard

the church forums). The Labor Forum is the announced advocate of the working classes. An enthusiastic, devoted, and self-sacrificing leader, Mr. Carl Beck, is responsible for its origin and excellence.

In addition to forums which use the English language, there are forums that use Italian and Russian—as the “*Foro Italiano*, a Ford Hall *dirimpetto la State House*” in Boston, and a Russian forum in New York.

The forum has proved particularly attractive to recent immigrants. Its democracy corresponds to their native ideal—an ideal too often destroyed by their early experiences in their adopted country. The forum helps them to some discrimination in fixing blame for their ill-treatment; it offers them a mouthpiece for the woes they ran away from on the other side of the water and for those they have run into in America.

Another type of forum is “The Hungry Club” of Pittsburgh. According to its able and enthusiastic secretary, Charles C. Cooper, “The Hungry Club” is the only organization of its kind in the world. “Its membership consists of several hundred business and professional men who ‘want to know.’ It has no constitution nor by-laws. It has no formal organization. It has no business sessions and no regular officials. It never takes a vote. It never endorses anything. It is Pittsburgh’s open forum for the presentation of both sides of public questions.”

In spite of the diverse elements which make up the membership of an open forum, it would be a mistake to suppose that it is a Cave of Adullam, made up of malcontents, “down-and-outers,” and blatherskites. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

The questions asked and the speeches made from the audience of the Public Forum give surprising evidences of knowledge, seriousness and ability.

The trouble with the Church in dealing with economic problems is that it is not free and is not illumined. The Church has not substituted purpose for tradition. It is concerned much more with where it came from than where it is going. Does it, in fact, know where it is going? The Church Militant on earth becoming the Church Triumphant in heaven is no longer a panorama that seems real to us.

The Church, unluckily, has adopted the reigning economics and is merely a rubber stamp to commercialism.

This is the reason it has nothing to say about the war. It sees with the eye of bankers, statesmen, diplomats and manufacturers. It is not ahead of them but behind them. The forum is a school in which the Church can secure a more spiritual view of material things.

The forum is a device by which the people become articulate. "Silence is for the poor," declared Lamennais, the French priest, who labored for the freedom of the working classes within the Roman Church, and was driven out of it. Any institution that gives voice to the poor is an emancipator, for it breaks their worst shackle—silence. The cause that can be heard is in a way to secure its ends. A people that is articulate is on its way to victory. Church forums offer, as does nothing else to-day, an opportunity for the poor to be heard—a timely instrument just now when free speech has been so much abridged in public places. Dread of free speech has come to such a pass that the hall in Paterson which burned down after Emma Goldman spoke in it was considered by many religious people to have been directly destroyed by divine wrath.

America needs, too, the fearlessness and the thoroughness essential to open discussion which omits no element of criticism and leaves no danger unconsidered. Our national optimism inclines us to avoid serious problems; our easy material progress renders us forgetful of underlying difficulties. We are irritated at criticism of our institutions. We club and jail unpleasant prophets. The May Day Labor Parade in 1914 had this banner: "You may jail our leaders but you cannot jail our ideas." America must offer more safety valves to such explosive truths, to such suppression and injustice, especially when assailed by the new slogan of Privilege: "You may have the right, but we have the power."

Much of the present-day labor trouble is caused by the disappearance of the old-fashioned employer of labor who was successful in building up a business because he knew his men and how to treat them. The absentee employer is an economic danger. The striker is in revolt against hidden forces, not against persons, for he does not know them. The open forum, by contriving a better acquaintance between classes, helps this situation. One violent radical told me that he learned in the public forum that capitalists were human.

A public forum unites the university with the town meet-

ing. An expert is called in to lead the conferences; then the people thrash out the subject in open debate. So it provides a combination of science and democracy. The forum is giving back to America the town meeting which the growth of cities has robbed it of.

Open forums are not only harmonizers and educators of classes into a truer social unity. Their practical accomplishment also may be valuable.

An officer of the Public Forum (Inc.) led to Albany the committee whose labors resulted in the appointment of the New York Factory Commission. The Public Forum organized the first democratically run community center in New York, called by an expert the best in the eastern part of the United States.

The Prison Committee of the Public Forum brought to the attention of officials abuses in the Penitentiary and Workhouse, which are in process of being remedied.

The Legal Committee is providing volunteer counsel in the woman's court for defendants too poor or too ignorant to secure it for themselves.

The Relief Bureau is a daily ministry to prisoners—especially women—discharged from Blackwell's Island.

A question I frequently hear is: Why have the open forums (good enough things in themselves, no doubt) been conducted in consecrated churches and church buildings? What has religion to do with economics? In spite of an imposing list of advantages, why tie up this new undertaking to religion; why call meetings at which economics are talked in churches; why hold these on Sundays?

Economics are teaching the Church of to-day so much that the Church may well show some appreciation. In fact, if economics can inspire religion, then there is a natural relationship between them. The present humanizing of the dismal science is giving new faith to the Church. The brotherliness of international labor unions and of Socialism is helping the Church to recover the vision of a world of peace and good will. The multiplication of food and clothing—their easy preservation and transportation—are leading the Church to believe that poverty can be abolished. The organization of vast numbers in effective labor point to new unity and effectiveness among the devout. The loyalty and self-sacrifice of the working people for each other is a new Pentecost—a new outpouring of spiritual energy which speaks in

strange tongues, but tells of holy things. In spite of the temporary recessions of the war, these movements are to-day the brightest encouragements to humanity.

A better understanding between the rich and poor is a moral as well as an economic question. The rich must perceive how unfair it is for them to waste human labor in frivolous amusement, unnecessary possessions and injurious consumption. Short of the winnings of roulette, some American business men seem to think one dollar is as good looking and respectable as another. Why should workmen worry then because they expect pay without giving good work or full time? If they could get the dollar for absolute incompetence and for no work at all, they would only be securing what political jobs, corporation salaries, speculative pools, very often provide for their favorites—pay for no equivalent. There is no more profoundly *moral* question than what a man does for his income and with his income. The relation between income and service must become one of the great themes of religion.

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